



NEWS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Office of the Secretary

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BABBITT ANNOUNCES NEW POLICY, PLANS TO "DELIST" ENDANGERED SPECIES

New Emphasis and actions could change terms of ESA reauthorization debate

GILL, MASSACHUSETTS --With a backdrop of two nesting bald eagles raising their three week old chick, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt announced a seemingly minor new policy with major implications: The Administration will make it a priority during the next couple of years, to propose delisting or downlisting close to two dozen endangered species that are healthy and thriving once again.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service signed the policy, which sets in motion the legal process of moving roughly two dozen species, including bald eagles, either off the Endangered Species Act "list" or to the less critical "threatened" category during the next couple of years. Removing recovered species from the list enables officials to redirect funds and manpower to species with greater needs.

"Our new policy, to emphasize delisting, could alter the terms of debate over the future of the landmark 1973 conservation law," said Babbitt. "For we can now finally prove one thing conclusively: The Endangered Species Act works. Period."

Critics of the Act often claim that once a species is placed on the list, it stays there forever, citing that as evidence that the Act is ineffective and should be weakened or even repealed. With future delistings, their argument becomes moot.

Bald eagles, initially declared an endangered species in 1967, recovered to the point that they were upgraded to threatened status three years ago. Today, more than 5,000 nesting pairs of bald eagles live in the lower 48 states.

"In the near future," said Babbitt, "many species will be flying, splashing and leaping off the list. They made it. They are graduating. They're coming back to their native American soil, water and wind."

Adding species in need of the Act's protections to the list remains a high priority for the Service, particularly any species facing high immediate risks that require emergency listing. Currently, 1,135 species (466 animals and 669 plants) are on the ESA List. Under this Administration, the Service has placed an average of 85 species on the list each year.

A serious backlog of listings resulted from the April 1995 one-year Congressional moratorium on adding species to the list and major rescissions of the listing budget. When the moratorium was lifted and funding restored, 243 species were awaiting final listing determinations. The progress since then in reducing the backlog now allows the Service to allocate resources to delisting activities for the first time in almost three years.

Therefore, under a new policy (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Listing Priority Guidelines) and for the first time in history on this scale, the Service will make a priority to delist and downlist more than two dozen birds, mammals, fish and plants that have achieved or are moving towards recovery.

Said Babbitt: "Some proposed delistings --like the gray wolf, the peregrine falcon, or the American bald eagle we honor today --embody symbolism and capture the public imagination. Others --the elusive Virginia northern flying squirrel or the lowly Missouri bladder-pod --are less charismatic but just as ecologically essential. And all are equal members of God's creation."

The Clinton Administration does not view adding species to the list as a sign of success, but of failure to meet the needs of species before they reach the crisis stage. Under Babbitt, the Fish and Wildlife Service has begun work with landowners using incentives to protect private land as habitat that can aid in the recovery of species.

Babbitt said the delisting action may alter how the ESA reauthorization debate is framed: "For the first time we can get past the rhetoric and see the light at the end of the tunnel. For the first time we can focus time, money and attention on ounces of preventative medicine rather than pounds of Emergency Room cure.

"Will Congress reauthorize the Act this year? Maybe, maybe not. That's up to the Hill," said Babbitt. "But they should take note: This is just the beginning. Now, on my watch, this Administration will continue to focus our efforts on creative, responsible ways to get and keep these species, and many more, off the list and back to safe and healthy habitat and robust population levels once again."

Who: Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt and USFWS officials with partners.
What: Tour of bald eagle nesting site followed by briefing on ESA policy.
When: May 6, 1998 boat tour with press starting at 11:00 a.m., briefing at 11:30am
Where: Barton Cove Campground, Gill, Masss.
Why: Because the Endangered Species Act works.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Photos and B-roll footage of recovering species will be available at the news conference or from Washington contacts on Wednesday morning. Photos of the Barton Cove eagle nest may be viewed or downloaded at: www.nu.com/eagles (the chick hatched on Easter Sunday).

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